DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 730 HE 031 465

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TITLE Participation and Progress: Improving the Climate for Women of Color in College.
PUB DATE 1998-04-16
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Asian Americans; *Blacks; Cultural Differences; *Cultural Pluralism; Educational Attitudes; *Educational Environment; Educational Opportunities; Faculty; *Females; *Graduate Students; *Higher Education; Minority Groups; Seminars; Sex Differences
IDENTIFIERS Louisiana State University Baton Rouge; *People of Color

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the interactions of a group of women of color in a graduate seminar, focusing on what they had to say about barriers and supports for women of color in higher education. Using critical race feminism as a theoretical framework, the paper focuses on the experiences of a professor and 10 graduate students who participated in a seminar entitled "Women of Color at College" at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, in 1997. Participants presented their works in progress while others responded and offered suggestions, critiques, and reinforcements. The group's discussions often focused on the desire for the educational environment to recognize differences between and among groups of people who appeared to be similar, as well as the difficulty of negotiating within all of the many identities held by the participants. It is recommended that efforts to support the success and contributions of women of color in higher education focus on recognizing differences (without essentializing them), creating inclusive environments based on those differences, and working within the tensions created by competing allegiances while retaining connections to various academic and nonacademic communities. (Contains 38 references.) (MDM)

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Participation and progress: Improving the climate for women of color in college

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Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association

April 16, 1998; San Diego, CA

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Becky Ropers-Huilman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Participation and progress: Improving the climate for women of color in college

The purpose of this presentation is to examine a specific method or experience which we engaged in with the goal to improve the climate for a group of women of color in one academic setting. Specifically, we analyze the interactions of a group of women of color and interpret what they suggest about barriers and supports in higher education. Ultimately, our hope is that this paper will engage readers as we explore the complexities of turning theoretical urgings of race and gender scholars into practical action.

We will approach this purpose using the following format. First, we briefly examine the literature, statistics, and experiences which provoked us to initiate the experience we discuss. Then, we turn to a brief explanation of critical race feminism, including the key tenets that we used to support our work. Next, we present the details of the context in which the experience on which we focused this paper emerged. Further, we pose some of the complexities we encountered as we attempted to create a context in which women of color in college could inform and improve their own college experiences and those of other women. Finally, we conclude with tentative recommendations that we would suggest for individuals who may be interested in involving themselves in similar efforts.

Provocations

Even a cursory review of existing literature and statistics quickly makes clear that students' race and gender still actively shape their educational experiences at all levels (Collins, 1991; Delpit, 1995; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lewis, 1993; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; West, 1993). Bernice Sandler (1993) asserts that women often experience a "chilly climate" when they work and learn in educational institutions. Shirley Clark and Mary Corcoran (1993) believe that professional socialization takes different shapes for men and women and, therefore, often leads to different career paths. And Luba Chlinwiak (1997) asserts that in the vast majority of leadership positions in higher education, women are markedly absent. When the racial dynamic is added to a gender analysis, the picture becomes even more bleak. As Deborah Carter, Carol Pearson, and Donna Shavlik (1996) describe, women of color are in "double jeopardy" when they participate in higher education. Some have asserted that this is because of negative interactions with others who doubt their abilities (hooks, 1996), while others have claimed that the lack of representations of achieving women of color in curricular materials create a climate in which women of color's ability to shape society and knowledge is ignored (Higginbotham, 1993). For these reasons, bell hooks points out, Black women intellectuals often struggle to conceptualize themselves as active and important scholars.

This literature base urged us to consider the ways in which we could create an "academically sanctioned" context in which women of color were actively represented by establishing their thoughts and ideas as primary in one educational discourse. We also wanted to acknowledge the varied effects that double jeopardy has on the women in our group, and work to find strategies whereby the pressures of living in that danger could be named

and alleviated. In some ways, we approached our group with the acknowledgment that while oppression is difficult to talk about, it is necessary to consider if people of diverse groups want to identify and get rid of the ways they intentionally and unintentionally hinder each other's success (Yamato, 1990).

Statistics have also contributed to our desire to improve college climates for women of color. The National Center for Education Statistics (1997) reports that the number of doctoral recipients has increased for women from 13% in 1970 to 39% in 1994. Additionally, they report that ethnic minorities earned 10% of all doctoral degrees in 1981, and 14% in 1994. These numbers suggest that colleges and universities have finally begun to make great strides in retaining and graduating minority graduate students. Certainly, this is an indication of increased support for ethnic minority students and for women.

Yet although these numbers are impressive, the increase in numbers does not tell the whole story. Have colleges and universities truly become more "minority" and "women" friendly by understanding and changing institutional practices and policies that often cause hostile environments? Or have these institutions merely established remedies to address quickly apparent needs (such as increased financial support) while neglecting the equally important needs related to social support and culturally inclusive programming and curricula? Many minority scholars who have "made it" into the academy still feel that they are continually working "against the grain" in hostile and unwelcoming environments (de Castell & Bryson, 1997).

It has become apparent through our interactions with group participants that, although access to higher education has increased for minority students, the climate is still rigid and uncompromising in many ways. This observation is evident when one explores the invisibility of minorities (especially minority women) in scholarship, students organizations, tenured faculty positions, and key administrative positions (Carter, Pearson, & Shavlik, 1996; Chlinwiak, 1997). This lack of inclusion leaves many minority women feeling isolated and misunderstood. bell hooks (1990) describes the way in which Black women have been isolated and rendered invisible with the following words:

> No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. When black people are talked about sexism militates against the acknowledgment of the interest of black women; when women are talked about racism militates against a recognition of black female interest (p. 7).

Although hooks' argument details the plight of black women, many other ethnic minority women encounter the same feelings of exclusion and isolation. Marvalene Styles Hughes (1996) finds that there are many common themes and patterns among minority women; especially prevalent are the continued exclusion and isolation that they experience. Hughes writes:

> Isolation is a result of feeling as if one is the only person experiencing a given phenomenon. Feeling isolated increases the odds that one can objectify a mainstream reality, but the possibility remains that one

> may internalize and personalize the negative experience. Both gender and ethnicity isolate minority women. They are without the support system of like-ethnic professionals and without the possibility of mentors or role models who share their ethnic or cultural heritage. The lack of interethnic sensitivity and bonding among women exacerbates the loneliness of each woman (p. 480).

Five of the 12 members of our seminar are or were enrolled in the graduate program which has the largest number of African American students at Louisiana State University. Although the enrollment numbers are impressive, group members often discussed a cold working relationship with faculty members. One group member said:

> It doesn't matter how many minority students you have in a program. . . . These White folks are still going to try to make your life miserable cause they don't believe you have any business being there in the first place. What really matters is the number of Black faculty present. . . . Well, Black faculty that give a shit (group member, 4/14/97).

The presence of minority students in higher education has indeed increased. Yet, isolation, intimidation, and both overt and covert racism and sexism still plague the academic community.

Theory

The literature and experiences described above led us to consider the multiple theoretical stances that could inform our approach to improving the climate for women of color in college. We recognized the possibilities of both feminist perspectives that explore the relationships between and among women and men, and of theories that explore racial dynamics in our society. As such, we situate our work within the emerging body of scholarship labeled *critical race feminism*. It is important to note that while various strands of feminism informed our work together, many of our group members choose not to claim feminism as a movement with which they seek to identify. By choosing the theoretical framework of critical race feminism, then, we are not asserting that all of the group members would identify with that perspective. Rather, we assert that we have found critical race feminism to be useful in this analysis and the construction of this presentation.

Critical race feminists are multidisciplinary, drawing on scholarship and practice from a wide range of fields and perspectives (Wing, 1997). This is especially appropriate to our study, since the group participants come from a variety of educational and social backgrounds. Critical race feminists are also keenly interested in how theory connects with practice (Wing), emphasizing that reflective action is imperative to changing race and gender relations. We are interested in taking our discussions and theorizing about gender and race and turning them into practical action that would improve the conditions of women of color in academic settings. Many critical race feminists use narrative or story-telling to convey their points (Gilmore, 1997; Guinier, 1997; Williams, 1997; Wing). In our group, we attempted to focus most closely on the stories that members of our group told both orally and through their writing as they made sense of the experiences of women of color in

college. Further, in many ways, critical race feminism parallels with what Patricia Hill Collins (1991) has described as Black feminist thought. For these reasons, critical race feminism was useful in reflecting on what we could learn from this experience about improving the climate for women of color in college.

Context

In the spring semester of 1997, an academic seminar loosely entitled "Women of Color in College" was offered to students at Louisiana State University. The rationale behind the seminar centered on the need for women, minority women in particular, to have a safe space to share ideas, vent frustrations, deconstruct negative imagery, and offer sound advice to one another. An equally important purpose of the group was to discuss, synthesize, and produce a body of literature that would speak to the experiences of women of color in academic settings.

This group was initiated by both of us, each having had experiences that led us to want to form a group such as this. Becky was a first-year assistant professor at the time, transplanted from Madison, Wisconsin to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, while Stefanie had been assigned to work with her as a research assistant. Stefanie's underlying rationale for initiating this group was to see and participate in higher education forums that were created by and for women of color. Becky had been interested in that type of movement as well, albeit for different reasons, and was excited that she might be able to both support and "listen in" on the resulting discussions.

Our group initially consisted of Becky (an assistant professor in Higher Education Administration), ten graduate women (one Asian American and nine African American) in English, Higher Education Administration, and Curriculum & Instruction, and two African American undergraduate women in English and General Sciences. We ranged in age from 18 to the mid-30s. Our geographic origins were diverse, with several members coming from Louisiana, others from the Northeast, Midwest, and the upper Southern regions. Participation at any given group meeting varied, with approximately seven people being present at each meeting. Becky arranged to offer academic credit as an option for group participation and six people chose to receive that credit. Group participation was determined by invitation or request, with the result that one of us knew each participant from a previous context. We met for approximately three hours every other week in the African American Cultural Center on LSU's campus.

During the seminar, we actively pursued topics that we perceived to be of interest to women of color in college, and asked ourselves questions like:

- In what ways do the background characteristics and experiences of women of color affect what we/they need from and offer to higher education experiences?
- What are some "strategies of success" that we could offer to women of color who are thinking about participating in collegiate contexts?

- How can the experiences of women of color in this group teach administrators and faculty members how to proceed if they want to be allies to that group?
- How are women of color asked to be "representatives" for their race in higher education classrooms and other contexts? In what ways is that useful and harmful?
- What is the relationship between feminism and womanism? What are the implications of those two theories for thinking about women of color's lives as they move through college?

In addition to participating in dialogue related to the above questions and other topics, the expectations for the class included the completion of one piece of high-quality writing about women of color in college. This expectation yielded a variety of styles and focuses of writing, ranging from poetry and short stories about the diverse contexts from and through which women of color arrive at college, to more "academic" pieces thoroughly grounded in the literature of several fields.

During our meetings, participants presented their works in progress while others responded and offered suggestions, critiques, and reinforcements. Because the papers were about women of color in college or other educational settings, our conversations were often animated by broad social critiques, specific and detailed educational experiences, and, sometimes, frustrated speech about the difficulties women of color face in predominantly white educational environments. They were often characterized by debate, expressions of concern, and hope for the future.

In November of 1997, several members of our group participated in the Annual Association for the Study of Higher Education conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Our preparation for that presentation became yet one more site of "figuring out" what it was that we thought was important about our interactions. We eventually agreed to focus our presentation on questions related to identity, the inclusion/exclusion of minority women in higher education, and the need for well-developed and institutionally maintained support networks.

As a result of the seminar, we have found that the need for social, academic, and cultural stimulation and connection is so desperately needed for women of color as they make their way through the maze of collegiate life, but it is also shamelessly absent. We turn now to the complexities of our experiences, in an effort to inform those in higher education (to include students, faculty, and administrators) who are interested in considering the method that we chose as a tool to support women of color. We recognize, of course, that our environment and interactions were unique in many ways. Therefore, we offer our experiences as a case study for interrogation, rather than as a blueprint for others to follow.

Complexities: "Personal" and "academic" intersections

The group's discussion focused sometimes loosely, sometimes very tightly on the experiences of women of color in postsecondary education settings. Group members regularly argued that it was impossible for them to separate and compartmentalize their experiences and lives to talk *only* of teaching and learning, without talking

about the factors in the rest of their lives that affected their ability to participate in educational experiences. Therefore, when we reflected on the main themes from our group, we discovered that for this group, what is commonly understood to be "personal" was integrally related to how they could succeed in higher education settings. Here we discuss several important problems that our group members articulated as they attempted to understand and change the experiences of women of color in college. These themes are, we believe, consonant with the principles of critical race feminism described above.

Recognition of difference/Competing allegiances

"Simply, I am black and I am a woman, and the truth of the matter is that I do not want to be treated less than human for either of those reasons. . . . I cannot affirm one self if it degrades the other self. I must carve out spaces that value the infusion of the two" (group member).

The group discussions often focused on the desire for educational environments to recognize differences between and among groups of people who appeared to be similar. Only through that recognition of difference could inclusive educational environments be created. In our group, we discussed the problematics of being asked to represent all members of a group because of an assumed identity and the difficulty of being asked (implicitly or explicitly) to choose between gender and race as one's primary axis of oppression. This situatedness is created and maintained, in part, by educators, and presents continual dilemmas for women of color in college as they attempt to negotiate a space for learning and teaching within that assigned location.

Group discussions focused regularly on the difficulty in negotiating within all of the many identity positions which they held. For example, many group members had life partners, family members, or friends who questioned the direction of their career goals or, if supportive, lacked an understanding of their educational experiences. Simultaneously, many members of the university community failed to understand the nature of the struggles and accomplishments that these women of color were facing because of their non-university community ties. Especially as related to their race and gender, women of color felt that others had competing expectations of them that were difficult to meet. One participant put it this way:

> Perhaps that is the essence of women of color's identities in a predominantly white culture. Non-whites may necessarily do this negotiation [of their various identity positions] in order to survive, to generate a cohesive self and a connection to community.

While university personnel are not solely responsible for this complex positioning, they can work to be more aware of and honor the competing allegiances that women of color face when they attempt to participate in collegiate settings.

Moving from isolation to action

Another complexity that we faced, and that continues to trouble our thinking, relates to the ways in which this semester-long experience had effects on the lives of those involved on a broader scale. Further, we wonder:

did we improve the climate of our college – or any facet of it – for women of color? Admittedly, the effects of a small-scale project like this one is just a beginning of what is needed as educators seek to open up higher education environments for the full participation of women of color. We are still uncertain as to whether the experience had long-term effects on anyone involved. Future projects like this one might wish to involve an intervention project (Orner, 1996) that moved those involved beyond the isolation of the self and of the group toward activism focused on improving broader college environments for women of color.

Recommendations

Within the complex position sketched out above, we pose the following recommendations for persons who would like to support the success and contributions of women of color in higher education. As mentioned previously, these suggestions emerged from our group, and were therefore situated in a very specific time and place. We offer them with the hope that they will provide analytical and activist lenses, generating "interpretive tools" (Lather & Ellsworth, 1996) for a better understanding of the ways in which a variety of higher education participants can improve college climates. They are based in our need to consider strategies for women of color, and those who wish to support them, to 1) recognize difference (without essentializing it); 2) create inclusive environments based on that difference; and 3) work within the tensions created by competing allegiances while retaining connections to various academic and non-academic communities.

Communication/Seeking allies

Both women of color and those who wish to support them (and be supported by them) should seek each other out. The burden of initiation should not fall only on one group or the other. While this "ally" relationship is often difficult to develop (Ropers-Huilman, 1997; Segrest, 1994; Wilson & Russell, 1996), it is imperative that persons interested in the same goal find strength in each other's efforts.

While it is important to communicate particular needs and objectives with faculty and administrators, it is equally important to communicate these same needs and objectives with peers. As Marvalene Styles Hughes (1996) asserted, isolation is a key source of distress for women of color in academic settings. The communication of one's needs and aspirations to others who are interested in one's success can serve to decrease that sense of isolation. Members of our seminar learned early on that despite differences in majors, educational attainment, personal backgrounds, and beliefs, educational experiences were surprisingly similar. This realization can lead to increased understanding, as one group member (4/14/97) articulated: "I thought I was the only one having problems with (that professor). I am glad to know it isn't personal." Sharing one's experiences with peers may be both eye-opening and cathartic. After realizing that a problem is not isolated, but rather is shared with others, group collaboration may provide remedies and strategies to address situations that seemed impossible to overcome.

The seeking of "external" allies is not unproblematic. There are times when group identification is most useful for social change. Specically, changes can be initiated both by mainstreaming one's efforts, focusing on settings where all persons come together, or by disengagement, whereby a group separates itself to reflect on and strengthen its positions, even if they are multiple and diverse. Nancy Adamson (1988) suggests that both strategies are necessary in order to promote social change. We need to be both looking inward to our own development, and considering how that development relates to how others perceive us and, invariably, try to shape us. Marvalene Styles Hughes (1988) wrote:

> As minority and majority women, we must look to one another for the support and sustenance we require, and we must incorporate our increased understanding and sensitivity into all our interactions: with students, colleagues, and supervisors, both female and male. We need to know far more about one another – ourselves, our families, our personal cultural orientations. We need to move personally and professionally toward understanding that is based on knowledge. We need to develop a vision of leadership that recognizes and affirms multiple strengths and values, a leadership that honors unique contributions from women of different backgrounds and heritages (p. 483).

Higher education research and teaching communities need to continue learning when it is appropriate to integrate understandings and highlight differences and when it is more useful to allow a protected space for individual groups to communicate among themselves. Seeking allies and deciding when and how to communicate are decisions that cannot be made lightly.

Establishing support networks

One observation that was made by our group members early in the course was that our sessions were often therapeutic. Peer counseling – both in and outside of the class – became an important part of establishing a positive and supportive learning environment in this context. Group members asserted that the ways they understood the experiences of women of color in college (as represented both in the literature and by other group members) were heavily implicated by the personal beliefs and experiences they brought to that engagement. We deliberately attempted to guide the class discussions in ways that attended to issues that have typically been considered both "academic" and "personal."

While we acknowledge the problematics of running an academic class in this less traditional way, we believe that the intertwining of literature (or subject matter), experience, and peer teaching and learning is valuable to the improvement of academic environments for those involved. Those environments can strengthen self-empowerment, critical thinking, desire for theory and practice, and long-term learning. This assertion is supported by much literature, such as Paulo Freire's (1990) Pedagogy of the oppressed, Ira Shor's (1992) Empowering education, bell hooks' (1994) Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom, Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule's (1986) Women's

ways of knowing, Becky Ropers-Huilman's (1998) work entitled, Feminist teaching in theory and practice, as well as many others (Ellsworth, 1992; Lewis, 1993; MacCorquodale & Lensink, 1995; McKeachie, 1994, for example).

Components of a successful program

We also learned from the logistical difficulties that our group experienced. If a group experience similar to ours seems like it might be valuable in other settings, we offer the following suggestions. We found that it was imperative that the individuals invited to participate are willing and able to contribute to the success of the group. Each participant in this experience became an active teacher and learner – both positions were imperative to the group's success. No one or two individuals should be shouldering all the responsibilities of the group; it should be a collaborative endeavor.

We also elected to establish an agenda that laid out our goals for the session. Our agendas included readings of individual member's work, discussion of relevant literature, discussion of current topics that were related to our discussions, and debate about race and gender related issues that might influence the positioning of women of color on college campuses. For our group, it was important that the agenda be established not only by the "teacher," but rather by all participants. Within any attempt to collaboratively establish a common direction, however, comes tension. We would encourage others who are interested in groups such as these to overtly acknowledge the tensions and discuss why they have occurred, as well as how they can be harnessed so that the tensions themselves become educationally useful.

Conclusion

While there is an emerging body of literature that supports the need to examine the experiences of people of color (and women of color, in particular) as they interact within college and university environments (Fleming, 1983; Hsia & Hirano-Nakanishi, 1989; Rendon, 1992; Washington, 1996), we believe there is a corresponding need to consider the ways that higher education participants can both understand and actively support and work to improve the experiences of women of color. As such, we sought in this paper to contribute to the knowledge bases that a wide variety of higher education administrators and faculty could draw on as they influence educational policy and practices. We hope that this work will stimulate readers to seriously consider the ways in which their research and practice can improve the climate for women of color on their campuses.

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